

Sociology and the Social Sciences

Sociology is one of the family of social sciences – anthropology, economics, geography, history, political science, and social psychology. All the social sciences engage in systematic study of social behavior and its products, and there are no clear boundaries between them. Indeed, some of the most worthwhile studies are done when people from different fields work together. However, even when they study the same problems, the various social sciences emphasize different aspects.

Anthropology is partly a biological and partly a social science. Physical anthropology deals with the biological origins of the humanity and with variations in the human species, including race. Some anthropologists specialize in studies of the great apes, and their work throws light on human development and human behavior. An example of this approach is research on dominance and submission among primates (Pfeiffer, 1978:241-244).

Social and cultural anthropologists study the ways of life of preliterate communities. We have drawn on such studies in a number of places in this book when we compare presentday industrial cultures with Third World and preliterate cultures. (For example, see Adaptation 12.2.).

Economics deals with cost and price, saving and investment, Supply and demand, and the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services. When economists construct models of how the economy works, they often assume that people make economic decisions on the basis of certain goals, for example, to earn the maximum income with the least effort or least investment. Such assumptions are essentially psychological and sociological because they refer to personal preferences and social values. However, the assumptions may or may not correspond with the facts. Sometimes people choose leisure over money or a future goal over an immediate goal, and these noneconomic facts limit the applicability of economic generalizations. The economy is also related to and dependent on noneconomic institutions and forces, including government, the family, population change, and public opinion. Both sociologists and economists are interested in the problems of poverty and income distribution, which are discussed in Chapter 11.

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Geography, like anthropology, spans the natural and social sciences. It coincides with the concerns of sociology on such topics as population distribution, urban ecology, and the use of natural resources.

History is both one of the social sciences and one of the humanities. Historical documents are valuable in sociological research, and sociological analyses are of interest to historians. In recent years, the development of social history has led to fresh insights on such subjects as slavery and family life. Historians have also tried to apply sociological research techniques to earlier periods, for example, in studying such topics as occupational change and inheritance.

Political science is primarily concerned with the study of government, and traditionally it has had a strong legal and administrative emphasis. But because politics and government are rooted in culture and social organization, political scientists have become interested in exploring social influences on administrative decisions and political behavior. The growing role of political decisions in many areas of social life has also stimulated interest in political sociology. These subjects are dealt with in this book, especially in the chapter on politics and law.

Social psychology is largely concerned with the links between group life and the psychologists contribute to this area of knowledge. In their attempts to understand individual behavior and personality, social psychologists investigate interpersonal relations and group behavior.

They study social roles, the development of personality, the meaning of social attitudes, and the dynamics of small groups. In this book, aspects of social psychology are treated in connection with behavior in small groups and the processes by which the human animal becomes a human person.